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Sampling

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Lindsay Marks Sampling

I

Today I am stationed across from the Ready Bacon, boneless pork and florescent pink pickled eggs. Cindy Lauper's "Time After Time" is playing over the intercom speakers and my latex-gloved hands are wet and freezing, the fingertips stained orange from carrot juice. Pregnant women harvest the corn for barbeques, ripping off husks and hurling them past the garbage can and over near the "slice of America" watermelon barrel. Today is Thursday, a slow day for the Meijer produce section where I sample out Bolthouse Farms carrot juice to America's thirsty consumers. When I am not recalling the sugar content of the Passion Fruit flavor (28 grams per 8 ounces) I am thinking about old age and what my hands will look like in fifty years.

I hand a two-ounce cup of Tomato Carrot juice to a woman whose hands look like a pianist's—her veins run their pattern under transparent, pocked skin, her knuckles are swollen, arthritic. Her left hand shakes, she is concentrating—don't spill, don't spill—but a drop of juice lands on my tablecloth. She apologizes so heartily that I want to embrace her from across the card table.

She'll buy a bottle of the Tomato Carrot so long as she can open the cap without too much trouble.

"Now that I'm alone I can't open these things anymore. They're always so hard to open." I agree that caps are getting harder and harder to open these days. The Meijer rotisserie chicken song pipes in overhead.

"I have so many bottles of juice at home, but when I can't open them I just leave them in the fridge."

I picture this woman's collection of unopened juices like fantasies untouched, sealed for freshness to suspend inevitable rotting once opened and sipped from. I think about how in fifty years I, too, will not be able to open bottles alone.

II

It is especially cold in the refrigerated juice section of the store, and I have forgotten my sweater again. My white t-shirt reads "Bolthouse Farms. In the produce section. Naturally." We feature an all-natural, no preservatives, no sugar-added beverage that people love to hate. My solicitations warrant looks of disgust, "No thanks, looks too healthy," or if

they're witty, "Can't, I'm driving." Good one, old man. Until I joined the juice business I was ignorant of the outrageous number of juice brands on the market—Sunfresh, Everfresh, Orchard Island, Odwalla, Knudson, Zeiglers, Noble, Cherry Ridge, Tropicana, Rio Red, Nature Blessed—and these in the cabinet freezer alone. But we collectively put a friendly face on health-consciousness and quickly make friends with the geriatric set. One gentleman bellowed repeatedly in my face, "This stuff's good for your prostate!"

Cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, missing eyes, missing limbs, the deaf, the burnt, the crippled—I am the apothecary, I am the cure. I listen to countless stories of heart disease and dialysis and kidney stones and of botched hysterectomies and children with cancer. My "tips for marketing" handout encourages juice samplers to point out relevant health benefits. And so I tell the woman whose enormous body cannot be contained by the motorized cart that carrot juice is first-rate, exactly what she needs.

"I'm a diabetic." She looks hard at me, "It sucks, it really does."

I politely agree and continue to pour for the long line of patients stretching out their hands to be cured.

III

My Czechoslovakian acquaintance stops by the table for some orange juice, the only flavor without carrot in it. He stocks beer for Meijer and we must be on the same store rotation because I am seeing him everywhere. Between sarcastic murmurings about the Roseville Meijer being overrun by ethnic minorities and the poor ("cheap bastards"), he is catching me up on his recent trip to Las Vegas.

"Doesn't your wife care that you go pick up girls in Vegas?" I ask without trying to chide.

"No, she don't care. She came with me to a topless beach in Yugoslavia one time and went ahead and took her top off too. She don't care."

He always talks to me like a beer buddy, but his gaze says something so sexual I have to turn around and re-price my stock. Oddly, he confides in me just like everyone else in the store today. I am a friend and I will listen to your gripes:

"I tell you what...people today."

Marks

"I keep two refrigerators full of food, but my grandson still never comes to visit."

"Where the h---'s the Tropicana?"

IV

A greasy, long-haired woman strides to the edge of my table, her black t-shirt reads in bold white "Do I look like a f----- people person?" I undertake not to spill on her, knowing she could swallow me in one gulp, and let her try as many flavors as she pleases ("You like Passion Fruit?"). She is one of many customers who appear to wear their mantra on their t-shirts. I saw "American by birth, Southern by the grace of God" not long after on a man with tight jeans and steel toes.

I suppose people want to be sensational. They will hardly be noticed in any other way, especially at the grocery store—the microcosm of the

multifarious American demographic—there's just too much competition. Here, there are wild-eyed old men who quip, "Got any vodka to put in there?" as if it were the first time I'd heard the comment. There are first or second or third generation immigrants for whom I must point to pictures and speak in stunted phrases—"You like this?" There are women pushing carts teeming with children, a brood of overstuffed American babies. There are men with bellies that grow out of their necks.

And what could I think of the woman who raises her hand like a gun, points it towards a Middle-Eastern family and says clearly enough for me to hear "Bang! Get out of my country." The two black women standing nearby look at me and snicker and all at once I think patriotism an ironic thing and I think America foolish and I think the grocery store a sanctuary for the ignorant.